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Joint Inspection Unit

Business continuity in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Business continuity in the United Nations system" (A/67/83).

* A/67/50.

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Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Business continuity in the United Nations system" (A/67/83) examines the existence of business continuity strategies, policies and plans within the organizations of the United Nations system, identifying commonalities and differences; best practices in implementation; liaison and coordination mechanisms between the organizations; and the functioning and staffing of business continuity units, including their financing frameworks and funding mechanisms for their operation.

The present note presents the views of the organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations set out in the report. Those views have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which welcomed the report and generally supported some of its recommendations with a view to integrating relevant recommendations into existing or future business continuity strategies and policies.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Business continuity in the United Nations system" (A/67/83) examines the existence of business continuity strategies, policies and plans within the organizations of the United Nations system, identifying commonalities and differences; best practices in implementation; liaison and coordination mechanisms between the organizations; and the functioning and staffing of business continuity units, including their financing frameworks and funding mechanisms for their operation.

2. The review found that few organizations have approved business continuity policies or plans, or have begun implementation in a comprehensive way. The inspectors learned that in some agencies, elements of business continuity were handled in isolation rather than holistically and that the lack of senior management understanding as to the purpose of business continuity management has led to inadequate political and financial support by Member States. The review also found that inter-agency cooperation on business continuity issues is of an ad hoc nature and that there are economies of scale to be gained through more organized system-wide cooperation and harmonization of practices which could be discussed within the High-level Committee on Management of CEB.

3. The report recommends a variety of actions, including placing business continuity managers in the office of the executive head or the executive office for management; stronger senior leadership commitment and support from Member States; allocating dedicated human and financial resources; developing business continuity policies, strategies and plans and assigning responsibility for their implementation once approved. It also notes that organizations should raise awareness through business continuity training incorporated in staff development and induction courses for all staff members, as well as the need for periodic training to be provided to critical staff members as an integral part of business continuity management. The report further recommends that the scope of business continuity plans should be organization-wide, including field offices. Resident coordinators should oversee the knowledge-sharing, cooperation and complementarity of preparedness for business continuity of the United Nations organizations at their duty stations.

II. General comments

4. The organizations of the United Nations system generally support the conclusions of the report and appreciate the inclusion of lessons learned and best practices as captured in the report. Most agree with all nine of its recommendations and support their implementation. Some organizations indicate that many of the recommendations have already been implemented or that they are actively pursuing business continuity policies and strategies. Furthermore, some organizations note the report could have been strengthened by calling for legislative bodies to provide mandates for business continuity activities, including the required resources. Finally, organizations note that the report does not clearly differentiate between recovery and continuity and while the Joint Inspection Unit emphasized the continuity component, agencies suggest that the steps required for recovery should also have been highlighted.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not done so yet should develop business continuity policy/strategy, including the assignment of business continuity management with responsibility for implementation, to be submitted for information to the legislative bodies.

5. Organizations of the United Nations system support and welcome this recommendation. Some organizations currently developing business continuity policies and strategies note that they are under review in light of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit.

Recommendation 2

Executive heads should place business continuity management in the office of the executive head or the executive officer for management.

6. Organizations generally agree with the need to enhance control and compliance with business continuity policies and strategies, however several agencies stress that executive heads should decide on the placement of the business continuity management function through the appropriate governance structures of their organizations.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not done so yet should develop and approve a documented business continuity plan based on a risk assessment, identified critical functions and recovery time objectives.

7. Agencies welcome this recommendation and several note that their business continuity policies and strategies already take into account the assessment of the core functions of their organization and the principal risks to those functions.

Recommendation 4

Executive heads should ensure that the scope of business continuity plans of the United Nations system organizations includes their field offices. Overseeing and control mechanisms should be in place to ensure the coherence and interoperability of the business continuity plan with the headquarters and the United Nations country team, where appropriate.

8. Organizations of the United Nations system support this recommendation and note that it should take into account the different field structures among the organizations. For agencies with a limited field presence, business continuity policies and strategies are maintained locally, in conjunction with other United Nations system mechanisms at the relevant duty station.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General should ensure that the Resident Coordinators oversee business continuity preparedness of the United Nations organizations

present in their duty station with a view to enhance knowledge sharing and identify possible areas of cooperation and complementarity.

9. Organizations of the United Nations system support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 6

Executive heads should ensure that business continuity planning and implementation form part of accountability and performance evaluation of line managers.

10. While organizations of the United Nations system welcome this recommendation, they note that implementation will be difficult, if not impossible, for most agencies.

Recommendation 7

Legislative bodies of the United Nations organizations should, on the basis of the executive heads' budget proposals, provide the necessary financial and human resources for the implementation, continuous monitoring, maintenance and updating of the approved business continuity plans developed on the basis of the organization's business continuity policy/strategy.

11. Organizations of the United Nations system support and welcome this recommendation which, in their view, would enhance the accountability and efficiency of business continuity management programmes across the United Nations system, noting however that decisions on budgetary matters rest within the authority of their governing bodies.

Recommendation 8

Executive heads should ensure that business continuity training be incorporated in the career and staff development courses, including induction training, and that periodic training be provided to critical staff in the organizations as an integral component of business continuity management.

12. While organizations support the spirit of this recommendation, they note that at a time of severe resource constraints this was not considered a general training priority. They agree that staff members engaged directly in the contingency planning process, however, should receive continuous training.

Recommendation 9

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as the Chair of CEB, should direct that business continuity issues be put on the agenda in the harmonization of business processes of the framework of the High-level Committee on Management with the aim to develop and approve maturity models for business continuity preparedness, business continuity plan templates, and good practice guidelines designed for the United Nations organizations.

13. While agencies express appreciation for the benefits that would be derived from strengthening common approaches to business continuity management, they caution that the recommendation is too ambitious in aiming to consider business continuity management under the harmonization of business practices. They suggest

that the aim of the recommendation, to enhance the coordination and cooperation of business continuity management programmes across the organizations of the United Nations system, could be achieved through sharing of lessons learned and best practice with less emphasis on the development of tools and frameworks, as these can vary considerably based on different business models.